

Can Kant Save Us from the Wild, Wild Net?

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Captain's famous line in *Cool Hand Luke*, "What we have here is a failure to communicate," later echoed mockingly by Luke, proves prescient for understanding communication in a post-Cartesian world.¹ In 1967, few people could have predicted just how far the certain walls of the Cartesian and Kantian modernist worldview would fall. Certainly Jacques Derrida and Roland Barthes had already started to theorize a poststructuralist and nebulous universe.² Yet now with "IM'ing" and blogs we have textuality that is highly decentered and in which identity is as amorphous as the medium. As Kalyne Pudner relates in her scenario of highschoolers, Jack and Jill, meeting online and having a growing romance, we discover that Jack is really a balding middle-aged Eugene. Parents understandably want to return to a world of white picket fences, not walled communities, clear enemies like the Soviets, not the truly poststructuralist Al-Qaeda, and proximal neighbors, not "e-predators." Yet when I read the solution was a return to a Kantian universe of Categorical Imperatives that demands a respect for the "thickness" of particular individual humans in the "thinness" of universal humanity, I think back to Luke's sarcastic reply to the Captain. I just cannot comprehend how Immanuel Kant's moral imperatives predicated on a highly structured cosmology will ever work in the nebulous realm of the Net that fosters teenage rebellion from societal and parental authority.

Recently, I read an article in *The Washington Post* that highlights the problems inherent in establishing rules for such a decentered medium as the Net. Ellen Nakashima reports that

Some bloggers have called for a voluntary code of conduct, including a ban on anonymous comments. But other bloggers resist because it seems like a restriction of free speech. The founders of BlogHer, a 10,000-member online community supporting women, said the best way to enforce civility on a blog is for each site to create its own rules — such as removing abusive comments — then make the rules public and apply them fairly.³

Calls for "Netiquette" have garnered the ire of free-speech advocates who argue that if one cannot stand the "flaming" that occurs so often on the Net, then he or she should stay off. In fact, women who call for more civility bear the brunt of masculine vitriol as noted by Susan Herring.⁴ Nakashima reports that "a 2006 University of Maryland study on chat rooms found that female participants received 25 times as many sexually explicit and malicious messages as males."⁵ What struck me the most about this article is the competing visions for conduct on the Net informed by gender constructs. I also see the issue of gender at work underneath the surface of Pudner's paper with a feminine demand for security at odds with a masculine demand for freedom, protected by violence.

In my own classes and documented in my research, I have set guidelines against flaming in shared online spaces.⁶ Of course, I can police flaming with my grade book (each user has a specific avatar tied to her or his student account so no user can flame

anonymously), but on the World Wide Web, how do we police Netiquette? Private providers of blogs can ban users who break their codes of conduct, as Arianna Huffington does on her very popular *Huffington Post*. Yet abusive users may have already scared away the targets of their attacks and can come back to the blog with a new user name (or even use a different of many avatars). So the damage is done with traditional masculine dialogical violence as another feminine contributor avoids posting. So certainly a deep problem exists, yet a strict form of Netiquette fails to address it.

In the case of Eugene posing as Jack, what would Netiquette have done to prevent this sexual predator from establishing a relationship with this young girl? It seems that this middle-aged man may well have practiced more traditional manners than younger “IM’ers” so as to attract Jill’s positive responses. A categorical imperative of treating people as you would expect to be treated (the Golden Rule) is fraught with difficulties as identity indeterminacy, as Pudner notes, remains an accepted norm. Who are people online? Are they their avatars or their embodied selves? Do they begin to see themselves as their avatars? Do their non-traditionally modern western desires (for instance, a middle-aged man’s desire to date a teen) act as an embodiment of their ethics? Did Eugene truly fall in love with Jill and want to treat her with respect and kindness as their meeting at a local football game perhaps illustrates? Was Eugene hoping to truly be loved by Jill seeing past his online Jack persona? Or was Eugene planning on raping Jill had she left the game with him? Or was he simply taking advantage of her immaturity, perhaps discontent with her parents, by enacting a dual role of parental figure and romantic partner? Again I fail to see how categorical imperatives — voluntarily enacted — would solve this very disturbing issue.

As I briefly brought up in the preceding paragraph, teenage rebellion is at the heart of the IM’ing issues. Since at least Huck Finn and Tom Sawyer, America has held teenage rebellion as a rite of passage. Teenagers often contradict house rules for IM’ing by posting with “bad” kids; sharing intimate information, desires, and even photos; placing photos of illegal activities on Facebook and MySpace pages; and using teen code for parental supervision (for example, “PIR” for “Parent(s) In Room” and “POS” for “Parent Over Shoulder”). In a society where advertisers increasingly target teenagers’ (and now even “tweens”) sense of freedom to exploit their buying power, and as parents wade into this swelling tide of adolescent agency, a return to traditionally strict rules often resembles King Canute’s ill-fated attempt to push back the tide.

I do not intend to dismiss Pudner’s call to “address the conceptual challenges raised by computer-mediated communication.” People who have and work with children do need to address this nettlesome question. I argue, however, that the central issue is one of misapplied modernist gender constructs in a postmodernist world. As Megan Boler has argued, gender assumptions that men should prey on women and dominate them in online space (coded as public, not domestic space) underlie communication norms.⁷ People enact their social scripts, and online these constructs marginalize feminine voices. In fact, masculine desires for unfettered

dialogical freedom promote instantiations of masculine voice. The challenge is then to “toughen” up, as “Cybergrrls” tend to do (that is, to act masculine or give as good as one gets), or stay in safe places. Yet as noted above, masculine users attack on principle supposedly safe, moderated spaces, such as the *Huffington Post*. It seems that in this poststructuralist space, feminine participants will be shunted to online domestic spaces or encouraged to act more masculine. In this world, Jill should have figured out that Jack was too good to be true and truly a creepy Eugene, or she should have stayed off the Net. Of course, this dichotomy is premised on a modernist construct — the agency of the individual. Should we limit ourselves then to blaming the victim? No, we need, as Pudner has encouraged us, to look at the Net as a *phenomenon*, or “part of the world’s furniture.” While Pudner remarks that we need to concentrate on the *noumena*, or “rational authors of choice and action,” I believe that we need to examine the institution of the Net as Bruno Latour has suggested.⁸ We need to see the larger scale of the Net as a phenomenon that exists beyond borders, disrupts age and gender identities, and utilizes a highly nebulous ethical code (or even competing codes). An ethical code based on outmoded modernist ideals of respect based upon ultimate identity (essence, quiddity, *ousia*), really does not fit the bill. Ethics have evolved into contextual norms where an online Jack can titillate an online Jill, yet a proximal Eugene disappoints Jill’s proximal expectations, and perhaps has her parents, friends, and teachers questioning rightly what has become of reality and morality. Put another way, modernist ethics and postmodernist online living have found themselves in a failure to communicate.

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1. *Cool Hand Luke*, directed by Stuart Rosenberg (Burbank, Calif.: Warner Brothers, 1967).
 2. Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” in *The Critical Tradition: Classic Texts and Contemporary Trends*, ed. D.H. Richter (Boston: Bedford Books, 1966), 878–8; Roland Barthes, “The Structuralist Activity,” in *Criticism: Major Statements*, eds. W.D. Anderson and C. Kaplan (Boston: St. Martins Press, 2000), 487–92.
 3. Ellen Nakashima, “Sexual Threats Stifle Some Female Bloggers,” *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2007, A1.
 4. Susan Herring, “Gender and Power in Online Communication” (Center for Social Informatics Working Papers, 2003).
 5. Nakashima, “Sexual Threats Stifle Some Female Bloggers.”
 6. James Dwight, “‘I’m Just Shy’: Using Structured Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) to Disrupt Masculine Discursive Norms,” *E-Learning* 1, no. 1 (2004).
 7. Megan Boler, “The New Digital Cartesianism: Bodies and Spaces in Online Education,” in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004).
 8. Bruno Latour, “On Technical Mediation — Philosophy, Sociology, Genealogy,” *Common Knowledge* 3, no. 2 (1994): 29–64.